

# Gender Inclusive Trade and the Limits of Liberal Feminism

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The 11<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference of the WTO saw the coming together of 121 WTO members to support the Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment (hereinafter '[Gender Declaration](#)'). Members went on to endorse a liberal feminist strategy to promote gender equality within the international trading system. Pursuant to the Gender Declaration, the WTO has convened a series of [conferences and workshops](#) to deliberate upon ways to promote women's participation in international trade. The underlying objective of this exercise is to integrate more women into the neo-liberal globalization process.

However, the jury is still out on the ills and benefits of neo-liberalism; and herein lies the inherent limitation in the liberal feminist approach. Socialist feminists hold that the deeper roots of women's oppression – especially, women in the Global South – can be traced to the neo-liberal economic order itself. However, the liberal feminist approach extends no such critique of the global political economy. Much to the contrary, as [Nancy Fraser](#) notes, gender equality is but a smokescreen through which the liberal feminist discourse fosters the neo-liberal project (on socialist feminism generally, see [here](#) and [here](#)).

This is quite a fitting critique of the Gender Declaration as well, which [seeks entry into the neo-liberal trading system](#), without interrogating the systemic inequalities that it perpetuates. Consequently, the Gender Declaration, at most, offers a partial analysis of the problem: one that is primarily oriented towards the privileged position of white, middle-class women, but inattentive to the economic exploitation of women in the Global South.

[Proponents](#) of the Gender Declaration would argue that by promoting access to finance and female entrepreneurship – in areas such as public procurement, value chains and trade facilitation – the liberal feminist approach does address the distinctive concerns of third world women. This contribution, however, argues that such piecemeal measures would not be sufficient. A pertinent point of inquiry, conspicuously missing from the declaration, is the gendered impact of traditional trade issues such as agriculture, informal work of women in export industries, access to medicines and services. Rather than addressing such systemic concerns, the Gender Declaration serves the broader agenda of liberalizing the digital economy and public procurement markets – with profound repercussions for women in developing countries (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

Against this backdrop, this contribution demonstrates how the approach articulated by post-colonial and socialist feminists is more apt insofar as it studies the impact of trade liberalisation on third world women, in conjunction with its effects across class,

race, caste and sexual orientation (for an exposition of the post-colonial materialist feminist theory, see [here](#) and [here](#)).

### ***The missing agenda***

Gender-mainstreaming within the existing trading system has been insistently resisted by networks of feminist economists like the International Working Group on Gender, Macroeconomics and International Economics ([GEM-IWG](#)) and International Gender and Trade Network ([IGTN](#)). Their principal contention is that economically privileged women stand to gain the most from trade liberalization, while women on the periphery of the economic system are further marginalized. They validate their postulation through empirical studies across various WTO covered agreements: illustrating how trade liberalisation broadens the class divide, with all the more deleterious consequences for disadvantaged women, especially in the Global South (see [here](#) for recent work in this area).

Case in point is the inherently inequitable Agreement on Agriculture, and the ever proliferating Free Trade Agreements. Due to the liberalization of agricultural markets, small farmers in developing countries are outcompeted by the influx of imported agricultural goods. Their plight is exacerbated by the State's commitment to eliminate domestic agricultural subsidies. Resultantly, developing countries find themselves confounded by concerns of food security and large-scale farmer displacement. This has an indelible impact on the lives of women, who are amongst the most marginalized constituencies in the agricultural sector. Women are largely involved in informal agricultural activities, with minimal access to productive resources like land, credit and water. They are, therefore, amongst the hardest hit by the liberalization of agricultural markets.

The predicament of women in export led industries, such as manufacturing and textiles, is also telling. The emergence of global value chains (GVCs) has led to a substantial feminization of labour in developing countries. While this is a commendable development, it has come on the heels of gender-based wage disparities and exploitative working conditions for women in the informal sector. Thus, from a Marxist perspective, the advent of GVCs can be said to have created a '[global reserve army of labour](#)'. Studies indicate that the inclusion of labour standards within trade agreements is not a credible solution to this problem, on account of its protectionist character (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Thus, we need to rethink policy-options for alleviating women's oppression in the hands of GVCs.

Another area that exemplifies this conundrum is the opening of trade in services, which has typically benefitted qualified professionals, with no gains in sight for unskilled labour. For instance, labour migration (Mode IV) has been made permissible only for skilled personnel, and therefore, does not serve the interests of women care givers from developing countries. Likewise, the 'cross-border supply of services' (Mode I) has resulted in marked prosperity, but only for skilled IT technicians. One may also consider the liberalization of 'consumption abroad' (Mode II), which despite its advantages for medical professionals, has been accompanied by issues of sex tourism and surrogacy that afflict the more disadvantaged female population. Another matter of grave concern is the deregulation of FDI in services

(Mode III), which could threaten access to critical services like healthcare, education, water and banking, with severe implications for women on the fringes of the economic system.

The foregoing discussion is incomplete without a mention of the TRIPS-plus regime – a characteristic of North-South FTAs – which has strengthened patent protection, while attenuating the already meagre space for policy manoeuvre that developing countries have under TRIPS. Medicine prices have been on an upward spiral since the coming into force of TRIPS-plus obligations like data exclusivity, patent term extension, and patent linkage, among others. The plight of women is differentially exaggerated by developments of this nature, on account of their deplorable access to healthcare and medicine.

Strikingly, the above studies have not influenced the agenda of the Gender Declaration. Ideally speaking, the Gender Declaration should have tested the validity of the aforementioned claims in light of recent empirical evidence. Not only does the Declaration disregard these concerns, it instead focuses attention on areas that propose further trade liberalization and have long been resisted by developing countries for their asymmetrical character. In essence, thus, the WTO unequivocally exhibits its bias towards the neo-liberal philosophy.

### ***The Declaration's biased agenda***

The above claim may be validated, for example, by the Declaration's emphasis on enhancing female entrepreneurship in public procurement markets. With the purported objective of gender equality, the Declaration makes a case for public procurement market access – which would disable developing country governments from preferentially treating their domestic enterprises, and consequentially, impede their socio-economic development.

The Gender Declaration also seeks to bring through the backdoor the contentious issue of trade facilitation. By purveying the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) as a promoter of female economic empowerment, the Declaration glosses over the significant financial costs involved in its implementation, that developing countries would have to apportion out of their national budgets. Moreover, the TFA while facilitating imports into developing countries, offers nothing to expand their productive and export capacities, and may therefore usher in a situation of trade imbalance. In the foregoing context, [‘The false promise of Aid for Trade’](#) cannot be accented enough.

Another seemingly benevolent objective of the Gender Declaration is the promotion of female entrepreneurship in Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) integrated within GVCs. MSMEs, unarguably, provide employment to large sections of the female population in developing countries. However, the WTO's newfound interest in the promotion of MSMEs (see also the [Joint Ministerial Statement on MSMEs, 2017](#)) is possibly part of a bigger strategy to negotiate a binding agreement on the liberalization of e-commerce (see [here](#)). The standard argument of developed countries is that the liberalization of e-commerce would increase the market access of MSMEs. This argument, however, is unconvincing. The MSMEs located in

developing countries do not have adequate access to digital infrastructure, and would in all probability be driven out of the highly competitive digital markets. In effect, therefore, the strategy to promote MSMEs through the liberalization of e-commerce is highly counter-intuitive.

### ***In conclusion***

This piece is an attempt at highlighting how gender mainstreaming within the neo-liberal trading system can never address the concerns of the female subaltern. What is required, instead, is an appraisal of how trade liberalization affects women in the Global South, who are splintered along the lines of class, race and caste.

Given this context, it is concluded that the WTO must reform its approach to gender, if at all it is to meaningfully impact the lives of women. And no amount of window-dressing would help the cause.

*Pallavi Arora is a research fellow at the Centre for WTO Studies, Indian Institute of Foreign Trade. She holds an M.Phil. in Public International Law from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.*

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